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ABSTRACT

Ten basic guidelines for effective counseling offer support for small business development counselors. The guidelines are: (1) paying attention to the context of the meeting, including time, setting, and physical condition of clients; (2) being aware of nonverbal signals; (3) believing that the client has the ability to solve his/her problem; (4) being open to the unexpected; (5) listening effectively; (6) talking simply and clearly; (7) asking and answering questions effectively; (8) expecting and handling resistance to change; (9) building a resolution of the client's problem; and (10) inviting client feedback on the counselor's process. (MSF)

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Ten Guidelines for Effective Counseling

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Ten Guidelines for Effective Counseling

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This article offers support to Small Business Development Center counselors by presenting ten basic guidelines for effective counseling. These guidelines work for us in our practice, and we hope that they will help you too.

The counseling philosophy underlying these guidelines is based upon seven deeply-held assumptions about human nature, democracy, and adult learning. They include the following:

- Counseling implies change, and change often stimulates resistance.
 - Adults learn best by participating actively in the learning process.
 - People have the capacity to solve their own problems if appropriately supported.
 - There is an inherent human drive towards health and the creative resolution of conflict.
 - Attentive and caring listening can help people to grow in their capacity to manage their lives effectively.
 - In a democratic value system, people should be valued and respected. That is, they should not be manipulated or indoctrinated but treated in ways that enhance their freedom and personal power.
 - The counseling relationship should result in the increased empowerment of the client.
- Here, then, are our ten guidelines:

1. Pay attention to the context of the meeting.

By context, we mean all that precedes, surrounds, and influences the process and outcomes of the encounter between the counselors and the clients.

Included in the context might be:

- **The day of the week and time of day** Friday's energy level may differ from Monday's. Five p.m. level of attention may differ from nine a.m. level.
- **Physical condition of counselor and clients** Are they in good health? Hungry? Tired?
- **The setting** Is the room hot? Cold? Are chairs comfortable? Light adequate?
- **Expectations and assumptions of counselor and clients** Why are your clients here? What do they seek? What are their hopes,

concerns, and anxieties?

As a counselor, take all available means to make the physical conditions as comfortable as possible without being distracting or conducive to drowsiness. Favorable outcomes are more likely in an environment that is conducive to learning.

Remember, first impressions are powerful. Your appearance, manner, welcome, and control of the physical setting can create an atmosphere in which your clients feel comfortable, confident, and relaxed.

2. Beware of nonverbal signals.

It is becoming more widely accepted now that much communication occurs on a nonverbal level. The way we walk, move our bodies, gesture, change posture, twist, or slouch in our seats, grimace, frown, smile, and in a thousand other ways express ourselves, are all revealing.

Be aware of the nonverbal messages you might be giving your clients by leaning forward in your chair (which tends to be interpreted as showing interest and energy), the distance you place between yourself and your clients, and the abruptness or smoothness of your movements.

Be attentive also to the nonverbal behavior of your clients. Some of what they intend to convey may be carried in their body language rather than in their words. It is common to hear a verbal message that contradicts the speaker's body language. This is a sign of internal conflict, struggle, or division. Which message do you believe — the words or the physical signals? If you are wise, you will pay attention to both, for people are not always wholly integrated. They may be driven by internal contradictions, which reveal themselves in mixed messages. If the nonverbal message you are receiving seems both ambiguous and important to the matter under discussion, test out your hypothesis by asking the client for clarification. For example, you might say, "You seem to be angry about that. Am I correct?" or "This topic seems to make you sad. Is that right?" Don't be sidetracked by an extended analysis of "feelings." Instead, check out your assumptions quickly and in a non-threatening way, and then move on.

3. Empower the client.

The counseling relationship should be based upon the belief that your clients, given appropriate support, have the capacity to solve their own problems. This is a belief with powerful consequences, for it means that the solution lies within your clients, not within you as the counselor.

Empower your clients, instead of taking power from them. The most common fault of inexperienced or unskillful counselors is to take the problems (and power) away from clients by solving them. Counselors may mistakenly assume that they know the problem, or have "been there before," or have experienced something "exactly like it." You do not know the problem; you know only that tiny aspect of the problem that the client has chosen to share with you. You have not been in the same situation, for you are not the client. We each have our own unique background, strengths, limitations, aspirations — all of which affect both our view of our situation and our capacity to act upon it.

Moreover, you should not "solve" your clients' problems even if you could, for you will not be there when they implement your solution. Solving *this* problem actually renders them weaker, more dependent, and less able to deal effectively with the *next* problem.

Treat your clients as equals and with respect. Operate from the assumption that, given appropriate help, resources, and support, they have the power to live their lives effectively and to overcome difficulties. Don't come across as a guru or authority. Be honest. Don't hesitate to admit that you don't know. Keep the focus on your clients' stories. Don't take the focus away by telling stories of your own experience, which purport to show that you've already solved similar problems in your own life.

So, what can you say or do that is helpful? Express your confidence in your clients' ability to solve the problems themselves. Ask questions that encourage them to analyze the situation, to express their feelings and thoughts. Get them to begin to develop their own solutions.

4. Be open to the unpredictable.

One of the most valuable qualities of the effective counselor is an open mind. Your own experience, background, philosophy, preferences, personality, and style will, of course, affect your responses and ideas. But

try to remain open to the unforeseen. And try to see your clients as unique individuals, rather than as stereotypes.

This attitude stems from respect. Respect includes the belief that clients are worth listening to, and that they may be in touch with insights that are not apparent to you.

Consequently, you must be open to change and persuasion. This is not possible if you approach the interaction in the spirit of the traditional missionary, seeking the conversion of the other from a base of absolute certainty about the rightness of your own position. The "missionary" or "salesman" is far from the counselor model that works effectively with adult clients. You should seek to be a catalyst, who strives to collaborate with clients to bring forth the ideas or proposals or solutions.

Be ready to be surprised by your clients. You should not have a "doctrine" or "package" that you want to "sell" to the clients. Regard them as the experts regarding the *problems* and their *solutions*. Your expertise lies in your skills in the *process* of the encounter and in the quality of your *interaction*.

5. Listen with the whole of yourself.

Listening is both the most important and the most difficult part of the counseling encounter. It is important because caring and attentive counselors can release the clients' ability to solve the problems. Clients often experience a clarification of thought and feeling by talking with a sympathetic listener. Problem solving is enhanced by discussion of the problem with a focused, neutral person who pays careful attention and reflects the client's thoughts and feelings in appropriate ways.

Effective listening involves being focused, concentrated, with the whole of yourself available. Have you ever tried to talk with someone who was going through the mail while you spoke? Chances are you felt shut out.

Good listening requires you not only to be attentive to the clients' words, but also to try to gauge the feelings behind their words, using all available clues of body, gestures, tone, manner, and mood.

Why is good listening so rare? Because it is difficult and because its difficulties are commonly underestimated. What we call "listening" is often merely a polite waiting of one's turn while we allow the other person to express trifling or bumbling views, as we rehearse our own golden nuggets of wisdom.

Listening is hampered by our own internal filtering equipment that screen out or distort much

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It is a major communication error to assume that what has been spoken has been heard.

that is said to us. Our filters screen out the unfamiliar, especially proposals for action. It is easier to find reasons why unfamiliar proposals will not work than it is to change our existing pattern of thought or belief.

Other filters screen out threatening material. We find ways of not hearing, or rejecting, or defending ourselves against anything that threatens us, especially if it threatens our established sense of identity.

A third type of filter uses our previous experience to trick us into premature closure. We hear something that sounds familiar and we jump to link it with patterns we have already established. We dash ahead along the superhighways that we have traveled frequently before, even when our clients intend to take a side road. However, our rapid anticipatory closing of their presentations prevent us from really hearing what they are saying.

Effective listening is a very active process. As a counselor, you should accompany your clients every step of the way. Active listening means reflecting back to the clients what they say in such a way that its meaning becomes clear to them — often for the first time. You do this by paraphrasing or summarizing their remarks and feeding them back to them. "So, what you seem to be saying is..." "In other words, what you want is..." "Let me see if I understand your intention..."

Put your assumptions or hypotheses about their wishes, hopes, fears, plans into your own words, and check whether you're on track or not. The process of hearing you state what they are trying to say can be a wonderfully clarifying and revealing experience. They may never have done this before, and the beneficial effects of your reflecting and clarifying can be startling.

6. Talk simply and clearly.

What do you say to your client? Listening is the most important part of the counseling encounter, but speaking clearly also matters. You need to express yourself in a non-threatening way, so that your clients can remain open to what you suggest, and perhaps be influenced by it.

Help your clients clarify their intentions. You do this by reflecting back to them possible inconsistencies or internal contradictions in what they are proposing or seeking. Help them to explore what appear to be areas of conflict, thereby moving them to deeper levels of feeling and belief.

When you talk, speak clearly and simply. Avoid all jargon, technical, or esoteric language, and convoluted arguments. Estimate your clients' level of education and experience and try to match their level of preferred discourse, without being patronizing.

Do not try to impress your clients by your erudition, expertise, or authority. You are not there to impress, but to help. It does not help to be threatening in any way. Your approach should be supportive, affirmative, and optimistic.

Your task is to translate your inner convictions and opinions about your clients' problems into outer clarity. It is wise to try to establish a degree of "distance" or objectivity from their views and aspirations, so that you do not overlay their needs and problems with a covering of your own inner unfinished business and unresolved issues. If you find that you continually get hooked by, or have difficulty with, the same issue, you should note it and regard it as a useful warning signal that this is an issue that you probably need to work on elsewhere.

The best guideline is to speak briefly and to address only one point at a time. Don't attempt to say everything that needs to be said on the subject. Be content with incompleteness. Remember that most people can listen with close attention for only a few minutes at a time. When speakers continue at some length, most listeners "tune out" frequently, going on daydreams or mini-vacations sparked by a word or idea or gesture. They will then return some minutes later. The speaker is in a different place but tends to assume that the listeners have been following the whole time. This is a dangerous and often costly assumption.

It is a major communication error to assume that what has been spoken has been heard. Don't make that error. Instead, speak briefly. Make a simple point. Then wait for or invite reaction, questions, comments. Ask your clients to state in their own words what they heard you say, especially if it is an important or summarizing point. Then, in light of the clients' reaction, you can continue.

7. Ask and answer questions effectively.

One of the most common activities in the counseling encounter is asking and answering questions. This is a very important mode of communication, and it deserves special attention.

Questions are customarily misused and overused in counseling. Be aware of *why* you are asking the client a particular question: what is your underlying purpose?

Occasionally, in workshops or seminars that we are leading, we ask the participants to communicate by using statements only. Most people are usually very uncomfortable during the experience. One reason is that they are engaging in unfamiliar behavior. Another is that statements tend to be more self-revealing, and hence riskier, than questions. The usefulness of the exercise lies in the discovery of the variety of roles that questions can play in communication, from clarification to concealment.

There is a genuine place for good questions in the counseling situation. Through sensitive questioning, you can link your clients' present problems or dilemmas with past situations and contextual conditions affecting the present. Such questioning involves honest and real questions. Real questions are those to which you don't already know the correct answer.

There are many forms of inappropriate questions. For example, don't ask questions that are really disguised statements; make the statement instead. "Do you really believe that...?" "How can you say that...?" "Do you know how many times I have had to answer that question?" These are not helpful questions. They are self-protective, disguised statements. They tend to put your clients on the defensive and increase their discomfort.

Nor should you test your clients by asking questions to which you already know the answer. This is a time-honored device in classrooms, but it has no place in effective counseling. It is equally harmful to try to manipulate or control or trap your clients through a series of leading questions. This may enhance your feeling of superiority or power, but it ruins good counselor-client relations.

The worst questions put your clients on the spot or make them look foolish. "You mean to say that you went into that audit with no preparation?" Such questions destroy the delicate fabric of trust on which a good counseling relationship depends.

You in your turn will be asked questions by your clients. Some of their questions will be attempts to find out your credentials. Can they trust you? What expertise do you bring to the situation? It is best to answer

simply, honestly, briefly, and nondefensively. Don't go into a lengthy personal history, but recognize that the success of the meeting will depend partly on your clients' confidence in you. Be prepared to state succinctly, if asked, your background and experience.

Other client questions may attempt to put you into the position of guru or problem-solver by asking you for "solutions" to their problems. You must take care to avoid this trap, for to respond as they wish merely increases their dependency (which may be a major part of their problem) and does nothing to empower them for future success. Do not appear rejecting or cold. But gently turn the question back to them by asking them what solutions they have already tried. Did their plans work? If not, do they know why? What other alternatives are there? You must have your own hypotheses or suggestions, but it is wise to hold these back for a summary statement.

8. Expect, meet, and deal with resistance to change.

As you move through the counseling process, you will normally travel from exploration, through clarification, to resolution (partial or complete), and to a plan of action based upon the new insights and resolution. You should be clear that, once your clients begin to consider action, they are facing the need for change. Recognize that any prospective change may appear threatening and may result in resistance.

The stakes are very high because your clients may be betting their own — and perhaps others' — financial future on the outcome of the change. It is vital to establish honest communication with your clients and to identify and remove barriers to that communication. Resistance to change can be a powerful barrier if not recognized and managed.

The change that we refer to may be behavioral (how to manage a business effectively); it may be how your clients think about a problem (pricing, marketing, new business development); or it may be a lesson that your clients need to learn about themselves (that they base their decisions upon a need to be liked rather than on objective data). But, in one form or another, change is always part of the situation.

Common themes of resistance to change include:

- Inconvenience. "I've already studied the field; don't upset me with new data." Often clients will come to you looking for validation rather than a business consultation.
- Sunk costs. "I've put so much time and

Questions are customarily misused and overused in counseling.

"But can't you just tell me what I'm supposed to do? You're the expert."

What would you say in these difficult situations?

The editors asked SBDC counselors to pose questions that clients often ask. The authors offer several types of responses, noting that the context will determine the tone of the response.

Client: "But can't you just tell me what I'm supposed to do? You're the expert."

Counselor: "It's true that I'm here because I have some skills and experience that might be helpful to you. But I'm not as knowledgeable as you are about the details and background of your situation, let alone your own motivations and feelings. And, when you come to implement an idea, I'm not going to be around to make it work for you. After listening to you, I'm convinced that you have the ability and wisdom to solve this problem. I'm happy to work with you in clarifying it and exploring what might work for you. But, ultimately, you are the one who must be in charge of your life and your problem-solving."

Alternative Response: "But you're the expert on your own situation. Let's talk together on what you might do."

Client: "Tell me about your background. Have you ever counseled cases like this one before? Have you ever run a business yourself — or did you just get this stuff out of a book?"

Counselor: "Yes, I'll be glad to tell you about myself. I have seven years of business experience, including three years managing my own small consulting firm. I have to meet a regular payroll, supervise employees, and collaborate with partners. I have an M.B.A. degree and teach organizational development for the SBDC. While each case is unique, your case raises issues that are similar to many that I've met before. I've learned a lot from books, as well as from lecturers and counselors, but I believe there's no substitute for hands-on experience. I enjoy using my experience, knowledge, and training to think about business problems in general and help individuals like yourself, who bring their special and unique problems to me."

Alternative Response: "I'm getting the sense that you don't think I'll be able to be helpful to you."

The client looks out the window and doesn't appear to be listening.

Counselor: "Are you with me so far?"

Client: "Yeah."

Counselor: "Perhaps you could let me know what you've heard me say about this issue so far. I often find it helpful to stop periodically in a session like this and take stock of where we are. One of the best ways to do this is to have the client summarize what she thinks the counselor is saying." (Then wait in silence for the client's response.)

Alternative Response: "I'm getting the feeling that you don't really want to be here."

Alternative Response: "It's difficult to try to deal with these problems, isn't it?"

Alternative Response: "What would be most helpful to you at this point?"

Client: "Well, you've given us a lot of good ideas but we don't have time to implement them."

Counselor: "I can understand your concern about the lack of time to implement good ideas. You're right to be aware that time is a vital factor to consider if you want an innovation to be successful. If you think an idea is good, it seems that there is something in it that might help you. Try to analyze the idea and see if there is a small piece of it that you could implement in the near future. Take this small piece, set up a plan and timetable for implementation, and try it out. If it works for you, try another piece."

Alternative Response: "It sounds as if you're rather overworked. You've been so pressed you haven't had time to put the ideas we discussed into action." (Then wait for client's response.)

Counselor: "Let's look at your balance sheet."

Client: "I think that would be a waste of time. I don't think it really could tell us anything anyway."

(The counselor suspects that the client may not know what balance sheets are all about.)

Counselor: "My reason for suggesting that we look at your balance sheet is that the bottom line has a way of rising up and hitting you if you don't pay attention to it. I'd be glad to take a look at your financial situation today or at a later session. Or, you might want to hire someone to come in and give you a reading on your firm's financial health. It's like getting a physical check-up. It's nice to know you're in good health. It's also to your advantage to know if there are any signs of impending trouble." (This does not confront or corner the client, but let's him know there may be a cause for concern.)

Alternative Response: "You don't think looking at the balance sheet would be helpful. The reason I suggested doing so was that I thought it might give us some useful information. And if you agree, I'd like to talk to you about how to use a balance sheet to your advantage."

When the client didn't show up for an appointment, the counselor called to see what happened.

Client: "Oh, I don't know why I scheduled it for Monday. Mondays are always bad for me." (Sometimes clients assume that since they don't pay for SBDC counseling, they don't have to show up because they are not charged for missed appointments.)

Counselor: "I'll be glad to schedule a new appointment for you at a time that would be convenient. How about next Tuesday at five p.m.? It's helpful for me if clients who must cancel or reschedule an appointment call this office in advance because the time slot is held for them. On Monday, for example, I held that time for you, even though another client had requested it, because you and I had agreed on that hour and day. I'll look forward to seeing you on Tuesday at five p.m. If you find you cannot make that appointment please call this office as soon as possible. Thank you."

Alternative Response: "Let's plan more carefully next time so that we schedule our meeting at a time when you really want and are able to come."

Alternative Response: "Did someone suggest that you seek me out or was this your own idea?"

A client seems enthusiastic during the meeting, but when you call her a month later, she says she has not followed through on any of the suggestions.

Counselor: "How do you feel about that?" (If she says, "Fine.") "I wish you good fortune in your future activities. Call us again if we can be of help."

(If she says, "Badly.") "Is there anything in particular you would like to have followed through with by this time?"

(If she identifies some change.) "Can you think of a strategy to start the change — or a part of it? I suggest that you set a time-table for the implementation. Would it be helpful for you to schedule another session with me or another counselor to renew your examination of your situation?"

When you talk to a prospective client on the phone, you can tell that he really needs help. How do you convince him to come in?

Counselor: "I believe your problem is manageable, that improvements can definitely be made in your situation. In my experience, clients find much help by sitting down and exploring their problems with a sympathetic listener. I'd be glad to listen. Nothing will be demanded of you other than a willingness to share your questions, needs, or problems with me. I have confidence in your ability to solve your own problems, with appropriate help and feedback."

Alternative Response: "The issues you've mentioned are ones I've worked on quite a lot. I think that between us we might come up with some strategies that would make your work situation more manageable. Is there some time next week when you might come in?"

I think that between us we might come up with some strategies that would make your work situation more manageable.

*Change always
generates resis-
tance.*

- money into this that I can't change now."
- The client simply disagrees with your assessment of the situation and may value some things differently.
 - The client has a low tolerance for change and ambiguity.
 - The client may not trust you.
 - The clients are afraid to change because the new is unknown, or they may not have the new skills necessary for success, or it may represent a loss of control.

It is essential for you, as the counselor, to understand resistance and to manage it competently. The steps to success in this endeavor are:

- Anticipate resistance. Change always generates resistance. Don't be surprised or dismayed by its appearance.
- Recognize and explore it in a non-threatening way with your clients. Don't use pejorative labeling, such as stubbornness, naivete, mental confusion. Such labeling will lead you to the wrong problem and will drive your clients away because they will think you're not listening to what's really going on.
- Welcome resistance and use it in a creative way. Demonstrate to your clients that you are in fact listening, that you understand their aspirations, doubts, and fears. Express confidence in their ability to move beyond the stage of resistance to creative action on the other side.

9. Build a resolution.

One of the most exciting, and perhaps the most satisfying, phases of the counseling encounter is building a resolution of the clients' issues. This resolution may be a solution to their presented problem. Or, it may be the discovery that the presented problem is not the real problem. Or the resolution may be the clarification of where the client should go from here.

The satisfaction in this building phase often comes from the experience of working with your clients in an act of invention. Building is the opposite of what we are trained to do in academic seminars, that is, to point out the flaws and weaknesses in others' facts and ideas, depreciate others' hypotheses and suggestions, and put down others in an attempt to show one's intellectual superiority. To build means to see the potentially creative part in the other's contribution, to relate one's own contributions to it, and to add to it in such a way that something new emerges that neither

person could have created alone. This synergy or collaborative creativity is what makes the counseling encounter worthwhile and important.

The atmosphere that best motivates people to think creatively is one in which there is real listening, openness, trust, constructive feedback, and free speculation. There must be great tolerance of new ideas, metaphorical thinking, fantasies, and ambiguity. People must explicitly give each other credit for their contributions and point out the strengths and good points in even crazy-sounding notions. Instead of some winning (those whose ideas prevail) and some losing (those whose ideas are rejected), all win, because ideas are built upon others' ideas and all participants feel they have a stake in the final outcome.

Find ways to support your clients' drive toward creative ideas and the resolution of conflict. Encourage innovative thinking. Don't look for a simple right answer. This tends to keep you from exploring less obvious alternatives that might be more creative solutions. Ask "What if...?" questions. Play around with ideas. Reverse direction. Stretch the rules. Rephrase the problem. Postpone closure until you and your clients are ready for a resolution. If you find a locked door, don't push on it. Instead, ask your client to find a window to climb through.

Don't let your clients evade essential difficulties, but don't assault them with such difficulties so brutally that their energy and motivation flag. A sensitive and supportive counselor can help to moderate the influence of a client's overactive superego that demands perfection and the "one best way" to solve a problem. Maintain a consistently positive belief in the client's ability to arrive at a satisfactory outcome.

Towards the end of your time with your clients, feel increasingly free to intervene with suggestions or recommendations. These are best when they represent merely a summary of what your clients themselves have reached. But you may at this time identify resources for your clients or bring up things that have not been mentioned before and of which your clients seem unaware. Avoid the indoctrinating approach that says, "This will be good for you, and you should do it." Instead, try the more liberating and self-disclosing approach that suggests, "This has worked for me. You might want to look into it, bearing in mind that your situation is unique." As counselor, you should not impose your personal values

on your clients. But you need not hesitate to disclose your own values, as long as the timing and manner of your disclosure do not close down or discourage a free exploration of options.

10. Give and invite feedback on the process.

Conclude the counseling session or sessions by inviting your clients to give you feedback on your handling of the process. Ask them whether the process was helpful. If they answer affirmatively but generally, ask them if anything was particularly useful. Inquire if anything happened that was difficult or awkward or unhelpful. Again, invite specificity. Ask them if there were any matters they would like to have covered but did not, or what they would like to pursue in the future. Encourage them to think concretely about the next steps, including names, dates, and places. Small, specific goals are more achievable than global, abstract ones.

If your clients invite it, or if you believe they would welcome it, you can give them feedback on how they handled the session. It is very important to recognize that there are identifiable skills to being an effective client. Some clients are much easier to help than others. Working with them is pleasant, stimulating, and productive. With others,

massive resistance, dependency, or passivity may render the encounter difficult. Congratulate yourself if even modest progress is made in such cases. It can be helpful to your clients to let them know in what ways they made it easy or difficult for you to assist them.

Above all, retain a sense of humor and modesty about your efforts. Acknowledge your own limits and don't be hard on yourself. A sense of humor is the ability of being able to perceive the oddity and even absurdity of our human situation, the comic that is the other side of the tragic in life. It prevents us from taking ourselves too seriously. It helps us to avoid an attitude of arrogance about our own powers and responsibilities. It enables us to enjoy the process in the present and to anticipate the next encounter with zest. ■

For further reading, we recommend:

Helping Relationships: Basic Concepts for the Helping Professions: Arthur Combs, et al, Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1978.

The Consultant's Handbook: Paul Nash, et al, Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1981.

Authority and Freedom in Education: Paul Nash, New York: Wiley, 1966.

Reading Book for Human Relations Training: Lawrence Porter and Bernard Mohr (eds.), Arlington, VA: NTL Institute, 1982.

*Above all,
retain a sense of
humor and
modesty about
your efforts.*

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